"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Christian Faith and Community Concern

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There is a widespread belief that churches in town and country have an obligation and an opportunity to lend their support to the improvement of community life. There is a feeling that this obligation is inherent in the Christian faith. Why should the church cooperate with other community agencies in the task of community development ? Why should the church have a community concern ? Is this concern rooted in the basic doctrines of our Christian faith, or, is it but a reflection of current interest in community development ?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the basis of this concern on the part of the church. Is there a relationship between "God and community", between the Christian faith and community concern ? In an effort to provide an answer to these questions I am swimming in waters beyond my depth. I am neither a theologian nor a community expert. I am a rural minister who has found it necessary to seek an answer which would undergird, with conviction and courage, a ministry of over twenty years in a small community. Practical problems have compelled a deeper searching of the Christian faith for solutions and resources. New insights into fundamental Christian truth have deepened community concern and heightened my vision of community possibilities.

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Based on an address given at The Interseminary Rural Life Conference, Merom, Indiana, April, 1956. Rev. Eugene Smathers is minister of the Calvary Presbyterian Church of Big Lick, Tenn.

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MOTIVATION FOR COMMUNITY CONCERN:

Concern for community improvement may find its motivation from widely varying sources. It may be a purely humanistic, secular concern, based upon the scientific evidence of man's need for community, if he is to live a good life. This is not bad, but it is subject to disillusionment when faced with disintegration and defeat. At a deeper level, this concern may include humanistic values, yet be rooted in obedience to the will and purpose of God. It thus becomes a religious concern unaffected by failure or success, not subject to the vicissitudes of the moment.

Again it may be a self-centered concern, the desire for a nicer place to live, for congenial neighbors amid beautiful and comfortable surroundings. In high contrast, it may be a concern for a way of life in accord with God's intention, the way of self-giving, sacrificial love, and an inescapable obligation to care for the neighbors' welfare. Interest in one's community may be a desire for the"togetherness"of conformity and custom, or for the"togetherness" of loyalty and love under the judgement and mercy of God. As churchmen, we would seek the deeper motivations which have their source in the insights and convictions of our faith.

CHRISTIANS HAVE NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE:

As Christians we cannot escape involvement in the life about us. Withdrawal is to run away from our obligation. The Christian is to live and labor in the valley where the decisions of history are made. He is not a spectator on the side-line but a player on the field. Having been reconciled to God, he cannot escape the work of reconciliation. This is so because of the emphasis of the Biblical faith upon the facts of history. God makes Himself known in history. Therefore, His will and purpose have to do with <u>our</u> history, the place where life is lived.

God is concerned about what happens here. He has placed us in communities and has given us work to do. According to the Creation story, God has placed us here to till the earth, to work, to keep life moving forward, to cultivate community. Jesus teaches us to pray for "our daily bread" because daily bread is important. All of this relates to the community; to its economic arrangements and relationships, to its stewardship of natural and human resources, to its sense of justice and fair-play, to its scale of values and ideals.

How people live together is, at heart, a religious problem. The Christian's life is the life of a spirit which moves within the relationships of the community, criticizing, constructing, cooperating, as God gives light and as means are available. It is a life of love which accepts involvement in the problems of community life.

but rather that he became a living soul. The Hebrew word for soul refers to the whole human being, not just to some spiritual entity. Made in God's image we are given the ministry of reconciliation, and "reconciliation" is to theology what "integration" is to psychology and sociology.

RECONCILIATION AND COMMUNITY:

Finally, God intends that man live and work in community, for God is love and love can be realized only in community. Is not the doctrine of the Trinity, in part, an effort to explain the community which must exist in God if He is love ? So made in the image of God, man is made for community. We cannot be fully-developed persons except in relation to other persons and to God.

The Bible views man as a sinner. There is a tragic contradiction between man as he was created and man as he is. He was made to realize his possibilities for love and community, but actually his life is characterized by emptiness and frustration, by the lack of love, by separation and estrangement. He seeks to make himself, or the things he has made, the center of his life, and neither are sufficient to serve as the center around which his life can be integrated. He has turned his back on God, the one transcendent loyalty which can bind all life together. He is in need of reconciliation with God, and "human community" can come only as a by-product of that fundamental reconciliation.

Additional articles for our creed of community concern can be derived from the great affirmations of our Christian faith which center around Jesus Christ, especially those having to do with Incarnation and Atonement. The belief that Jesus Christ is the "word made flesh", the very expression of God in human form, adds intensity and depth to the positive acceptance of the whole scope of earthly life which the doctrine of Creation requires.

Community relationships have a sacramental quality. Even those affairs which have to do with the most material aspects of man's life are of concern to God. Our mission is not to escape from the body or from secular tasks but "to let God hallow the physical world, creaturely needs, and the common life." Even though these be as ordinary as bread and wine, He may be present by His Spirit. The Christian way is the way of involvement. It requires that we get into the midst of life, into politics and education and health and home-making and economics, and right in the place where we are to claim all of life for God as He has claimed it for Himself.

The first article in our creed of community concern might well be the affirmation that God the Father Almighty is "Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible". God is Creator and Sovereign of all life. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" - He is the ultimate ground of all being and is concerned about all things. To separate certain areas of life from His reign , such as economics, politics, or community relationships, is to try to dethrone Him.

If God is Creator of the physical world and takes delight in the work of His hands, it follows that the created world is good and is to be accepted with thanksgiving. Asceticism cannot be the Christian attitude toward it. We do not approach God by withdrawal from the world. We serve Him only by a righteous life in the world. We accept the challenge of the natural environment and make it serve human fulfillment according to His will. " ..... Biblical 'spirituality' is not the renunciation of the world but its proper and godly use." Our task as Christians is not to escape from the world but to live within it in such a way that we become "fellow-workers with God".

Second, the acceptance of the natural world as the gift of God results in a reverent stewardship of its resources and recognition of the unity and wholeness of all life. Community integration requires more than right relations between man and man. There is also need for right relations between man and the material world. Man can be either a co-operator with the earth's flowering heritage or a destroyer of the unity and balance of nature. His relationship to the land, the basic material resource, is a vital illustration of this truth. He can conserve or destroy. And to sin against the earth through abuse and waste or to sin against the fellowman through selfish hoarding of the earth and its life-giving resources is a denial of God's sovereignty. The scientific principles of good land use are the laws of God, and whoever humbly seeks to discover and apply these laws is acting in harmony with the petition: "Thy will be done." Under God, science and religion can be partners in the creative task of community integration.

A third aspect of our Biblical faith that is significant for our understanding and practice of community is that body of teachings which have to do with the nature of man himself.

Lack of community concern on the part of the church is often due to a conception that its primary task is that of "saving souls", implying that the "soul" can be saved apart from soil and society, apart from daily life and community. As widespread as this idea is, I can find no basis for it in Biblical teachings. In the Bible man is a unity of body and soul intimately joined together. The Creation story does not say that man was given a soul

UNIQUE ROLE OF THE CHURCH:

As the church looks at its community, there is need for a sort of "double-seeing", seeing with eyes of faith as well as with eyes for fact. Objective fact-finding will be welcomed and used. But the Christian, because of his commitment and sense of involvement, must make value judgements. Sociological and economic facts must be interpreted by faith. When life is committed to God, everything is seen in a new light. The facts may be the same but they take on a new and deeper meaning.

We use the word "community" in different ways, ranging from the identification of the place where we live to a description of life in harmony and peace with God and our fellow men. Here we are thinking primarily about the natural town and country community, a sociological entity which may be studied and objectively described. Even in this sense "community" is something given, something which we accept from God as raw material to be shaped and transformed according to His will.

As we approach the theological meaning of "community", this given-ness becomes even more true, for community, like peace or happiness, is a by-product of a life lived together in obedience to God and love for one another. We do not build or create "community" but strive to realize that quality of life to which "community" is given. Integration comes as the by-product of common loyalties and devotions. A community becomes Christian to the degree that its citizens share a common devotion and loyalty in every phase of life.

Usually, when we consider the contribution of the church to the growth and integration of the community,we begin with a program that the churches may develop. Being practical-minded we seek a clear-cut program by means of which the church can cooperate in community development. It is my conviction that the greatest need , and also the greatest potential contribution of the church, is not a program but a faith, a faith that can inform and guide our purposes and programs. "What a faith gives us is not a clear picture of a defined goal,but a firm conviction about what really matters and from which we can act in every situation."

The greatest contribution the church can make to the integration of the life of its sociological community is in the motivation, guidance and sense of vocation it can provide for people as they meet the relationships of every-day life. I believe that the church already holds such a faith in its hands -, in the tenets of its historic message. This only needs but to be applied to life in community. I am convinced that each basic doctrine of our Christian faith has helpful implications for community life. Therefore, let us explore, in part at least, some of the great teachings of our Biblical faith, something of their implications for the church and for Christians in the rural communities of America.

A delightful parable of the regard which God has for common things is to be found in a popular story for children, "The Littlest Angel". It is about a small child from across the tracks who brings his gifts to the Christ Child after all the gifts of the wise and the wealthy have been delivered. He is somewhat hesitant, being a little ashamed of what he has. But no other gift was as pleasing to God, for he had brought those things treasured by his childish heart: a butterfly with jewel-laden wings, captured in flight amid the glories of spring; a sky-blue egg from a robin's nest in a tree near his home; two glistening stones polished by swift moving waters, beautiful to a little boy playing beside the creek; the chewed-up collar of a little stray dog whose loyalty had meant much to one small boy.

Christ's coming into the world attests to God's concern for the common life of man and to God's purpose to redeem. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." The meanings which center around the ideas of "reconciliation", "atonement", "justification","redemption", "the new creation" are rich in implications for a creed of community.

If God sent His Son into the world to save men, it seems evident that He thought we were worth all the anguish and torment of a shameful death upon the cross. It inevitably follows that all men must be of worth to us. Anything which degrades or hinders the fulfillment of the humanity which Christ came to redeem is a denial of God and of His love. How can this respect for persons be made real any better than by the dedication of our time and talents to the cultivation of that quality of community life in which the full potentialities of persons can come to flower and fruit ? How can we love God whom we have not seen if we fail to love and respect the neighbor we meet every day?

The "new man" in Christ, justified by grace through faith, accepted and loved though a sinner, acknowledges his debt to God and seeks to express his gratitude by the acceptance of a "new status of responsibility in relation to other men". He not only serves God through the community of faith, the church, but also in the total community of mankind and in the particular natural community of which he is a member. As Alexander Miller says: " ... the test of a true Christian vocation is not spirituality as an end in itself, but social utility... It is holy not because it ministers to salvation but because it ministers to the common good." Christian redemption is a total redemption for man-in-community. It is not a Christian spirituality which has to be protected from entanglements with family life, economics, politics, or culture. Christ said that He came not to destroy but to fulfil. He came to make atonement. Not to separate, but to draw together, to make whole, to fulfil "this creatureliness, this human nature, in union with God."